

The cult of the boss

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'Today muscle is power. Earlier, only the son of the king could rule. Today everybody can rule. You need weapons to rule. Leaders need to have guns. Not everybody should have guns – only people with status. However, nowadays everyone who wishes can get guns and rule.'

–Raghu Yadav,
Dabang (boss) in western UP

THE North Indian boss contrasts kingly power with 'muscle and gun power', in a world where sufficient force and electoral politics can leverage rule.¹ Today, bossism is played out against a backdrop of rapid economic growth, and a scramble for economic resources. Alongside the manipulation of later forms of capitalism, competitive electoral politics (and their rising costs) are the pillars of the construction of decentralized fiefdoms headed by Mafia-esque bosses.²

Across South Asia, the bosses' styles of governance created systems

of economic and political governance which are popularly referred to with vernacular terms such as 'Mafia Raj', 'Goonda Raj' and 'Mastangiri' – rule by mafia, or rule by gangsters. These systems, which use force to accelerate the path towards power and wealth, share similarities with the Caciques and Caudillos of Latin America, the Mafiosi in Italy, urban political machines in the United States, and today's gangster politicians in Indonesia, Russia, Thailand, Philippines, Bulgaria, Turkey, Jamaica, Colombia and Brazil.

And yet, despite similarities in the ways which South Asian bosses function, acquire authority, wield power, and gain influence in their respective domains, they are distinctively shaped by the subcontinent's unique passion for 'the political', and some of the highest rates of participation and contestation in the world. Consequently, 'Mafia Raj is not an authoritarian but a *hybrid system of political and economic governance* which combine elements of redistributive, market, predatory and democratic logics.³

Drawing on ethnographic material collected in provincial town in western Uttar Pradesh, I shall explore in this

1. Research for this paper has been conducted within the framework of the research programme 'Democratic Cultures' (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/democratic-cultures>) which I convened between 2012 and 2016 (funded by following grants: ERC-AIMSA/284080 and ESRC-ES/I036702/1). Throughout the text I omitted names and/or used pseudonymous and obscured localities.

2. This essay greatly relies on experts from a book manuscript co-authored with Ashraf Hoque, Nicolas Martin, David Picherit, Paul Rollier, Arild Ruud and Clarinda Still entitled 'Mafia Raj: The Rule of Bosses in South Asia'.

3. For the elaboration of the concept of 'hybrid state', see Jaffe (2013: 735). On the concept of 'Mafia Raj', see Michelutti (forthcoming).

essay what the presence of bosses on the Indian political scene tells us about ‘democratic authoritarianism’ in South Asia and beyond. I suggest that looking at the morphology of small-scale bosses’ authority in provincial North India has the potential to shed some light on the symbiotic relations between democratic processes and violent entrepreneurial styles of political leadership. I also suggest that attention to the local dynamics of systems of (criminal) power and their multiple sources of authority may help to understand the rising global appreciation for leaders who cultivate a boss-like attitude like Putin, Erdogan, Modi and Trump or the late Chavez. How do muscular entrepreneurship, business acumen, managerial culture and cinematographic charisma provide a template for contemporary democratic politics? Are bosses ultimately chosen because they are *authoritative* or *authoritarian*?

I shall now go back to the opening quote by Raghu Yadav. The context of my research (western Uttar Pradesh) is widely known for its endemic violence and criminality,⁴ for being culturally shaped by the ‘macho’ ethos of its dominant castes, for being marred by communalism and caste based conflicts, and by poverty and underdevelopment.⁵ However, what is perhaps deeply misleading is the portrayal of this region as a poor backwater. On the contrary, ‘money’ – as informants again and again emphasize – ‘is not an issue here’. A rampant predatory economy linked to the construction and estate development sectors has created new opportunities and significant wealth over the past decade.

Raghu is one of the bosses I shadowed in their daily life during fieldwork.⁶ He is a small-scale town’s boss.

4. Brass (1997).

5. Jeffrey, Jeffrey and Lerche (2014).

In the literature, the paradigmatic boss is an individual who acquires power by achieving monopolistic or quasi-monopolistic control over an area’s coercive and economic resources.⁷ The boss is a person who claims for himself (for it is normally a ‘he’) the rights to discipline and punish, protect, tax, and represent local populations. In short, bosses not only want to make money through criminal enterprises or to mediate other’s people access to state institutions, they want to rule.

The aspiration to rule requires investing in a special set of resources that are not necessarily available to illegal entrepreneurs, brokers or individual criminals. A crucial resource is the threat of violence. However, bosses do not rely exclusively on brute force when ruling. Violence is necessarily coupled with legal and illegal entrepreneurship, charisma and persuasion, rules and honour, kinship networks, intelligence, professional legal and financial advice and, crucially, collusion with political and administrative resources.⁸

In western Uttar Pradesh the most powerful violent bosses are often referred to as *dabangs*. The term dabang entered the popular lexicon following the release of two films by that name in 2010 and 2012 and is now commonly used to refer to mafia boss-type leaders. Dabangs, unlike mere goondas, are public authorities and can

6. In the field I documented bosses’ will to rule. I mapped their territories, areas of domination, spheres of interest and jurisdictions. I followed them during election campaigns or appearances in court. I observed their styles of self-presentation, rhetoric, and the sites that they choose to gather support or to perform. These spaces included caste or business association meetings, religious festivals, bazaars, wrestling arenas, university campus, hotels, lodges and night clubs, commemoration ceremonies and sports events. I interviewed members of the bosses’ families, gang members, enemies, rivals, businessmen, criminal lawyers, crime reporters, accountants,

instil both fear and respect. As an informant explained: ‘A goonda is just a hired thug; to be a dabang you need to be charismatic, people need to give you influence, you need to stand out.’

What defines a dabang is command. Crucially dabangs, or their close relatives, occupy political seats that afford them both prestige and a degree of state protection. Moreover a typical dabang uses his/her own ‘crew’ as bodyguards, travels in white 4/4s with red beacons and party flags, and flaunts his/her wealth and power with weapons, ostentatious gold jewellery, and large farmhouses on the outskirts of town. Most importantly, the contemporary dabang is also a successful and legitimate businessman.

It is important to highlight that the dabangs I met over the course of my fieldwork represent a qualitative shift from the traditional figures of the *bhaia* or *dada* in any North Indian provincial town until about two decades ago. The traditional town and neighbourhood bosses used to establish their sovereignty through protection rackets, money lending, and adjudicating disputes.⁹ These old style protectors-cum-social bandits boasted of an exceptional muscular physique and reputed fighting techniques – usually acquired through wrestling. They employed their force to establish domination in the *mohalla* (neighbourhood) and

doctors, police investigators, astrologists, priests, and the residents of the ‘spaces’ where bosses operate.

7. On bosses as violent entrepreneurs and on party machine/bossism, see Scott (1969); Migdal (1988); on Italy, Blok (1972); Chubb (1982); on East Asia, Sidel (1999); on Indonesia, Wilson (2015); on India, Weiner (1963) and Vaishnav (2011); on Pakistan, Gayer (2014); on Russia, Volkov (2002).

8. Michelutti *et al* (Ibid: Introduction).

9. For descriptions of the figure of the *bhaia* in provincial North India see, Gooptu (2001); Michelutti (2010); in Mumbai see, Hansen (2001).

to acquire 'violent' credibility with their patrons (who were often the local politicians).

By contrast, today the small-town bosses and their associates have transmogrified into well financed interstate criminal networks whose criminal capital is used to build up political turfs and business fortunes. These bosses do not help politicians to govern any more: they themselves govern, directly or indirectly.

A former ward representative, Raghu Yadav is in his later fifties. His son and daughter-in-law are currently ward representatives in two different parts of the town. His father-in-law is an MLA and various relatives on both sides of his family are zila parishad members. Raghu regularly acts as the local *mohalla's* adjudicator. People flock to him (and pay him) to resolve disputes and to maintain order in the neighbourhood. In particular, people come to him when they find themselves entangled with the slow and corrupted Indian justice system and police.

Raghu Yadav has personal sovereignty. He dispenses justice and collects money ('goonda tax') against protection. His brother is a key figure in the local 'bhumi mafia' (land mafia). His uncle is involved in the local 'oil racket'. These 'mafias' are at the apex of much more extensive local criminal economic systems which to function need to be symbiotically related to formal, registered and regulated institutions and 'the political' sphere. Raghu has invested profit from illegal activities into legitimate business. He now manages two hotels, three restaurants and a cement factory. He owns several apartments in the newly constructing colonies which are springing out in the outskirts of town. Raghu describes himself as a successful businessman and a politician and he proudly adds, 'I am also what people call a dabang: a boss.'

As the other dabangs I have met he has an air of self-assurance and command, which I think is usually one of the bosses' best assets. Raghu does not need to use violence very much nowadays. The threat of violence is enough. 'Nowadays I use violence very minimally. To tell you the truth, I used weapons in public only twice in my life. Yes, believe me, I have only used twice in my whole 30 years' career of leadership. You know Ram, my youngest son. Well, I have an older son too. Once he was beaten up by his class teacher. My son lost consciousness from the concussion. I was furious. I went to the school and slapped the teacher.

'After that, I was surrounded by five teachers. It was then that I took out my Mauser. The teachers, when they saw the weapon, ran away quickly. I fired one bullet but it did not harm anyone. There was no FIR case registered against me. I used a weapon for self-defence. I knew that even if there was a chargesheet against me I could get bail... It was a case of self-defence. Even if I would have got caught, the sentence would have been minor... Weapons are very important for the protection of the life. Weapons are crucial to protect yourself.

'The second time I used a gun in public was when I fired during the Ramnavami festival.... I went to the temple with my sons. It was very crowded. My youngest son (Shiv – who is the one who is ward representative for X now) was already notorious when he was a kid. He is really my darling boy. Fearless and only 23 years old. He has been charged for attempted murder twice already. He is the youngest city ward member.... to go back to the temple story. We were standing in the queue. Shiv jumped the queue. There was a group of boys and one of them slapped Shiv and singled him out from the queue.

'Shiv came back to me in tears. I asked him what happened. I went to talk to those boys. One of the boys twisted my wrist. Can you imagine? The fight started and at a certain point I took the gun out and fired (laughs)... that led to a total stampede ... those boys (now men) still run away when they see me (more laughs)...'

Unpredictability and arbitrariness are still at the heart of the bosses' local authority and are cultivated in the popular narratives. After all, as Volkov points out, 'it [the capacity to use violence] becomes similar to a commercial reputation'¹⁰ – people come to you of their own accord to enforce services or settle disputes or to offer a ticket to contest elections. As Raghu explicitly pointed out, 'After all, it is not what you do and how capable of doing violence you are. What counts is what people believe you are capable of doing. It is the people who make you a dabang (a boss)! Not the other way around...' and, 'If people see you as powerful, then you are.'

Such comments highlight how the bosses' authority is co-produced and co-experienced. Bossism is a relational affair. A tendency to focus on individual leaders rather than on the social production and day-to-day management of their authority may lead to interpretations which emphasize the autocratic, authoritarian, and populist potential of bossism. What often remains under-analysed is the relational and horizontal nature of such forms of authority, the complicities and opportunistic partnerships which bind and connect bosses with the population among whom they live and 'boss'.

In North India, the ideal of a strong, 'wild' and dangerous boss has shaped political cultures. An old repertoire of tropes of honour, kingly

10. Volkov (2002: 45).

leadership, and heroism that valorize ‘criminal heroes’ feeds into the value placed on toughness and physical strength. For example, certain politically successful caste groups (such as the Yadavs in northern India) capitalize on ideas of community honour and ‘divine kinship’ to legitimize bossism.¹¹ Elsewhere, I showed how the bosses build their image of strength and action on a wide repertoire of cultural and religious resources that help to create a legitimate ‘muscular charisma’. This type of charisma is often seen as a quality inherited from hero-gods and sanctified by anti-colonialist figures, and enhanced by achievements in leading contemporary democratic social revolutions.¹² This is also reflected in the widespread idioms of fearlessness and virility that surround political and economic life and the popular imagery that advertises politicians’ ‘heroic’ (*bahadur*) capacity to protect.

A ‘tough reputation’ and the proven capacity to exercise violence is said to bring together the two long valued capabilities of the traditional ruler: to protect and provide. Bosses often choose to project an image of men of action: men who can ‘get things done for their people’.¹³ The qualities of effectiveness, potency and courage also signify the wealth, status and political empowerment of the community which they represent and rule. In similar ways, local people feel special and empowered through being linked by kinship (fictive and real) to their bosses.

What happens when leaders fail to project ‘boss-like’ authority? In mid-2012, a couple of months after Akhilesh Yadav had become UP chief minister, locals started to be concerned

about his lack of authority and incapacity to instil order through fear and respect. People would say that UP was run by four and a half chief ministers: Mulayam Singh Yadav (Akhilesh’s father), Ram Gopal Yadav and Shivpal Singh Yadav (Akhilesh’s uncles), Azam Khan, and Akhilesh is the half.

‘There are too many bosses,’ I was told at the time. ‘Every Yadav in town thinks he is the boss.’ Comparisons were constantly made with the previous BSP government and the capacity of Mayawati (the Dalit BSP leader) to keep the bureaucracy under control. By contrast the SP government was portrayed as chaotic due to the availability of multiple and often competing centres of power within the Samajwadi Party.

As one informant pointed out when commenting on the difference between the previous BSP regime under Chief Minister Mayawati and the current SP regime: ‘You see... Mayawati was alone – she has no family, no sons or daughters, no uncles! And she just took the money for herself and to build statues, but there are at least 20 relatives in Mulayam’s family who occupy elected state and national assembly seats – and hundreds of them at the local level, all of whom feel entitled to loot the state for as long as the SP stays in power’ (Rattan Singh, 35 years old, milk seller).

Around that time a story begun to circulate in the region: Akhilesh was having an animated discussion with his party men in his office in Etawah where they were having a meeting about party issues. Akhilesh became very animated and one of the party workers put a hand on his shoulder and gently said, ‘Bhaiyya, calm down.’ Akhilesh kept on talking as if nothing had happened. The day after, the man was found decapitated; his head was delivered to the chief minister. People

would tell this story with a mixture of horror and pleasure. Some felt almost reassured by it. In a way it showed them that their CM was not as weak as the press and media kept portraying him. In short, he was not just a puppet in the hands of his father and uncles.

Five years later Akhilesh Yadav is fighting to establish his authority within his family/party. The press, social media and TV describe the Yadav family feud using Mahabharata images. The father, Mulayam Singh Yadav fought to keep his role as the party’s leader. In the end Akhilesh ‘won the war’ and is now the boss.

It is not coincidental that during the ongoing Uttar Pradesh election campaign (2017) two of the most circulated and shared videos in the social media feature the CM as actor Shah Rukh Khan as a big boss in the Bollywood hits *Raees* and *Don 2*. The latter clip, entitled ‘Akhilesh 2’, features Akhilesh Yadav acting Shah Rukh Khan’s famous lines in *Don 2*: ‘My enemies were thinking that I would never return. But I will come back’ (*‘Mere dushman samajh rahe the main ab kabhi laut kar na aunga... mujhe pehchano, dekho main hoon kaun. Aa raha hoon palat ke.’*)

Systems of bossism are certainly testosterone-charged style of governance. These videos reflect and feed into the popular figure of the boss which stands for action, power, money and glamour. In today’s world, thanks to Hollywood and South Asian film industries and streaming, ‘the boss’ has become a powerful cross-cultural theoretical archetype. The provision of justice, the redistribution of material goods and intimidation are central building blocks of the bosses’ local authority as I briefly outlined above using Raghu’s life history.

However, what is also very important (and less explored) is the

11. Michelutti (2010).

12. Michelutti (2013).

13. See Michelutti (2010; 2014); Witsoe (2009); and Berenschot (2011).

role of the fantastic power of the self-made entrepreneurial boss in shaping political leaders' authority. Another video clip again features Akhilesh as Shah Rukh Khan, this time in the movie Raees saying: 'My mum used to say no business is small and no religion is bigger than business. What is good for business is good. What is bad for business is bad.' Later, Shah Rukh Khan says that he combines in himself both business sense (the brain of a Bania) and daring. The video concludes with a veiled threat, 'Aa raha hoon' (I am coming!).¹⁴

It should be emphasized that this is a world where the economy governs politics, not the other way around. Nowadays, leaders need to project a capacity to make money, to run successful businesses and make profitable deals. Raghu not only protects neighbourhoods, but also runs a large assemblage of legitimate business companies and properties. People often admire him for having built a small fortune from nothing and for building up a local political dynasty.

This is indeed a world where bosses are increasingly respected because they are successful, self-made men (and occasionally women) who ambitiously dare to take risks, manage to accumulate wealth, and build a better life for themselves, their families, their clients, and associates. Bosses are characters who are capable of shouting loudly: 'You're not my boss!' As such they are often admired for their determination and their claim to re-establish order. They are also admired because they *appear* to challenge caste and class barriers, gender roles, family hierarchies and

14. See the videos at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1tua-hd2_g (accessed 20/02/2017) and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjXmuPb9Hzk> (accessed 20/02/2017).

inequalities. Defying and escaping death, and their being 'above the law' also gives them an aura of extraordinariness. These mythologies of power create hopes and dreams of individual self-determination, and exploit shared imaginaries of popular emancipation and desire for freedom. Thus, the bosses' public 'declarations of independence' through charismatic improvisation and pragmatic complicity give voice to widespread cultural values of defiance, pride, respectability, and self-worth. In turn, these emergent mythologies of power vernacularize ideas and practice of democracy and the economy in new ways.¹⁵

It follows that people appreciate bosses because they are *authoritative*, not because they are *authoritarian*. The appeal of bosses should not be confused with a demand for authoritarian strongmen. People do not want a new 'Indira Gandhi'. What they appreciate is a boss, not an autocrat. They want individuals who are capable of leading, commanding and getting things done. Bosses do not run or aspire to run 'authoritarian regimes' – they run agile il/legal enterprises and work in unison with other criminals, businessmen and politician to create an environment ('Mafia Raj') which fits their needs.

Free market logics are at the heart of this systems of governance. Bosses work with 'democracy' and not against it as it would not be profitable to do the opposite. It follows that the presence of bosses does not automatically create authoritarian regimes or failed states as has often been assumed. Bosses do not have an interest in subverting local political and economic structures. As Brisquet and Faravel-Garrigues argued, bosses are 'very often satisfied with the existing

15. Michelutti et al. (Ibid.: Introduction).

rules of the political and economic game in which they move. Their familiarity with "the system" allows them to detect opportunities that enable them to develop their activities.'¹⁶

It should be also noted that bosses do not have unlimited powers and monopolies. The relation between bosses and the populations they command is extremely volatile. Importantly, populations live in contexts in which there are overlapping repertoires of authority. Raghu is certainly not the only authority available in town. People pay their dues to several of them at the same time.¹⁷ The volatile, unstable, evanescent and 'democratic' relations between the boss and their citizen-subjects distinguish this relationship from patron-client or king-servant hierarchical relations.

It follows that the systems of 'Mafia Raj' cannot be painted as a monochrome picture of victims, villains, autocrats, criminals or heroes. These are worlds in which it is often difficult to establish who the victim and who the perpetrator is, as individuals may be both at different times and in different spaces. Raghu is a boss but is also 'bossed' by bigger big men in the constituency and the region.

The bosses' positions are also perpetually insecure; they live in constant fear, fear of losing their position, their money, and their power. They have to continuously look over their shoulders to guard against ambitious young men and their own henchmen. Significantly, elections constantly put their power and impunity into question. Electoral democracy keeps them on their toes. Even seemingly untouchable bosses may fall (though some-

16. Briquet and Faravel-Garrigues (2010: 4).

17. Hansen (2005).

18. Jaffe (2013: 736) makes a similar point discussing donmanship in inner-city Jamaica.

19. Armao (2015).

times only temporarily) when they lose an election. The bosses' power is hence precarious and needs to be constantly reinstated and performed.

Ultimately these systems are 'neither hegemonic nor subaltern but a hybrid mix of both'.¹⁸ They successfully combine the local dimension of territorial control through plundering and the global dimension of the transnational markets.¹⁹ The result is a localized parcellation of authority which may not be necessarily complementary with top-down authoritarian regimes as hyper-fragmentation makes difficult the implementation of policies and ideologies on the ground. In the region, such fragmentation also makes electoral results hard to predict as elections are increasingly decided booth by booth.

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